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EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILDREN IN CARE TO IMPROVE THEIR OUTCOMES: WHAT WORKS?

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Facts and figures

Nationally and internationally, statistical information collated by governments and children's organisations is consistent in highlighting the gap in educational achievement and attainment between those in out of home care compared with their peers and that the gap begins at a young age, persists over time and worsens the older the child becomes (Vinnerljung, Oman, & Gunnarson, 2005; Liabo, Gray, & Mulcahy, 2012; Flynn, Marquis, Paquet, *et al.*, 2012; Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2012). While there has been some modest success in narrowing the gap against key indicators of educational performance (attendance, existence of special educational need, absenteeism, exclusions/expulsions, achievement in statutory key stage attainment scores and end of school qualifications), children and young people in out of home care generally still fair worse than the child population as a whole in the UK (DfE, 2015; Welsh Government, 2015; The Scottish Government, 2015; Department Health, Social Services & Public Safety Northern Ireland, 2015). Importantly, we also know from other international studies that the picture remains the same even once socio-economic background and cognitive functioning are controlled for (Vinnerljung, Berlin, & Hjern, 2010; Vinnerljung, Öhman, & Gunnarson, 2005).

Legal developments

In light of these concerns there has been a concerted effort to ameliorate the situation. First, there have been legal developments. In England, for example, the law has recently been changed through the introduction of the Children and Families

Act 2014 with the result that Local Authorities (charged with the delivery of services to children and young people) are now placed under a national legal obligation to promote the educational achievement of those in their care. In practice what this means, as outlined in the accompanying statutory guidance (DfE, 2014), is that: educational placements have to be found before moving a child; existing educational provision has to be maintained wherever possible; a suitable educational placement has to be found within 20 days post placement if provision has to change; and that all children are the subject of what is known as a personal education plan (PEP) and/or education, health and care (EHC) plan. Furthermore, care leavers – those of 16 years plus – are entitled to a range of financial and practical supports that extend into adulthood. In Northern Ireland while similar initiatives are in place, including the pupil premium and the personal education plan, the latter is not a statutory requirement (Perry, 2014).

Policy and practice initiatives

Second, a wide range of policy and practice initiatives have emerged both nationally and internationally designed specifically to tackle educational under achievement (Perry, 2014; Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2012). Recently published reviews in this area (Tideman, Vinnerljung, Hintze, & Isaksson, 2011; Winter, Connolly, Bell, & Ferguson, 2011; Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2012; Liabo, Gray, & Mulcahy, 2013) highlight a wide range of activity with interventions that are targeted variously at: the child (such as book gifting, additional tutoring, provision of additional activities and/or targeted financial support); their carer/supporting professionals (including, for example, training to increase the awareness and practice of reading support); and/or the school systems and processes (including identification, assessment, monitoring and management systems). However, it is also the case that despite this wide ranging activity, very little of it is accompanied by robust evaluations of effectiveness (Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2012; Liabo, Gray, & Mulcahy, 2013).

Effectiveness of interventions?

Bookgifting

Book gifting programmes aim to encourage children's engagement in reading through the distribution of free books. Book gifting interventions vary in terms of: the mode of delivery (through the post or left with a family by a professional such as a health visitor); the number and type of books gifted, the target age group (0-5 years olds, 7-11 year olds or older); the use (or not) of instructional manuals for parents/carers; and their intended outcomes. The overarching aim of book gifting programmes is to increase and improve children's literacy skills. Book ownership, reading for pleasure, enjoyment of books and book sharing (reading with parents/carers) are identified as important contributory factors in the development of literacy skills that book gifting schemes aim to support. Reviews of research on book gifting schemes (Burnett *et al.*, 2014; Slavin, Lake, Chambers, Cheung, & Davis, 2010; Winter, Connolly, Bell & Ferguson, 2011) indicate that evidence about their effectiveness in improving literacy outcomes is quite weak. One of the reasons for this is that there is often no requirement or instruction for carer involvement.

Tutoring

Recent findings around tutoring, which can be delivered by student volunteers, trained teachers, or foster carers trained in direct instruction tutoring (Flynn *et al.*, 2012; Harper and Schmidt, 2012), have shown that gains can be made by children. Flynn *et al.* (2012) for example showed that gains in reading can be made in a relatively short space of time when this approach is used. However other research on the effectiveness of tutoring indicates a lack of evidence of effectiveness (Courtney *et al.*, 2008).

Paired reading

Similarly, paired reading is an approach which has gleaned positive results for this group of children. Osborne, Alfano and Winn (2010), reporting on a study in the UK found that children made average gains of twelve months in their reading ages when this approach was used. Here carers were trained to work alongside the children in their care, however such findings need to be treated with caution as a control group was not used in this study. A Swedish study (Tordön, Vinnerljung and Axelsson, 2014) that also had no control group that replicated this British study, found similar results. In the Swedish study children made gains of 11 months over the course of the intervention.

Individualised programmes

In more recent studies (Tideman *et al.*, 2011; Tördon *et al.*, 2014) the focus has been the Helsingborg project which offers individualised school based educational support to children in care. The study by Tideman *et al.* (2011) involved 24 children whose cognitive ability, literacy and numeracy skills were assessed. On this basis a two year long individualised educational plan developed which comprised children's access to a psychologist and special education teacher. Results indicated significant gains in IQ scores (measured using WISC-111) and literacy but not in maths. In a replication study that involved 24 children and that used an enhanced and increased set of measures, Tördon *et al.* (2014) reported on the comparisons between the pre and post-test intervention scores from [should this be from?] age standardised instruments and found significant effects in intellectual capacity, self-concept, literacy and numeracy skills.

Conclusions

In the planning and decision making with children in care, given what we know about the role of education in securing good long

term outcomes, it is of the utmost importance that decision makers engage with research evidence as to what works best in supporting children with their education when in care. Furthermore, having engaged with the evidence base; the commitment of time, training and financial resources is required since some of the greatest effects, but not all, are associated with programmes where there is one-to-one engagement following a structured tutoring format.

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